

## OPINION

### GUEST ESSAY

# Boys Get Everything, Except the Thing That's Most Worth Having

June 5, 2024

**By Ruth Whippman**

Ms. Whippman is the author of “Boymom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity.”

The 20-year-old college student and gamer I met in Cedar City, Utah, didn't seem particularly amused by his own joke that he was a cultural cliché. He lived in his grandma's basement, and barely left the house except to go to classes. He spent the vast majority of his free time online — playing video games, watching porn and hanging out on Discord, the heavily male-skewed communication platform, where users gather in communities devoted to topics ranging from the innocuously nerdy to the utterly horrifying. By his own admission, he was brutally lonely.

During the pandemic, he was a moderator for a [Discord](#) community, at first mainly sorting out technical problems and weeding out trolls. But one night, an adolescent boy called him over voice chat, and started sharing how lonely and depressed he was. He spoke with the boy for an hour, trying to talk him down and give him hope. That call led to more like it. Over time, he developed a reputation as an unofficial therapist on the server. By the time he left Discord a year or so later, he'd had about 200 calls with different people, both men and women, who spoke of contemplating suicide.

But it was the boys who seemed the most desperately lonely and isolated. On the site, he said, he found “a lot more unhealthy men than unhealthy women.” He added: “With men, there is a huge thing about mental health and shame because you're not supposed to be weak. You're not supposed to be broken.” A male mental-health crisis was flying under the radar.

I have spent the last few years talking to boys as research for my new book, as well as raising my own three sons, and I have come to believe the conditions of modern boyhood amount to a perfect storm for loneliness. This is a new problem bumping up against an old one. All the old deficiencies and blind spots of male socialization are still in circulation — the same mass failure to teach boys relational skills and emotional intelligence, the same rigid masculinity norms and social prohibitions that push them

away from intimacy and emotionality. But in screen-addicted, culture war-torn America, we have also added new ones.

The micro-generation that was just hitting puberty as the #MeToo movement exploded in 2017 is now of college (and voting) age. They have lived their whole adolescence not just in the digital era, with a glorious array of virtual options to avoid the angst of real-world socializing, but also in the shadow of a wider cultural reckoning around toxic masculinity.

We have spent the past half-decade wrestling with ideas of gender and privilege, attempting to challenge the old stereotypes and power structures. These conversations should have been an opportunity to throw out the old pressures and norms of manhood, and to help boys and men be more emotionally open and engaged. But in many ways this environment has apparently had the opposite effect — it has shut them down even further.

For many progressives, weary from a pileup of male misconduct, the refusal to engage with men's feelings has now become almost a point of principle. For every right-wing tough guy urging his crying son to "man up," there's a voice from the left telling him that to express his concerns is to take airtime away from a woman or someone more marginalized. The two are not morally equivalent, but to boys, the impact can often feel similar. In many cases, the same people who are urging boys and men to become more emotionally expressive are also taking a moral stand against hearing how they actually feel. For many boys, it can seem as though their emotions get dismissed by both sides. This political isolation has combined with existing masculine norms to push a worrying number of boys into a kind of resentful, semi-politicized reclusion.

The statistics are starting to feel like their own cliché. [Over a quarter of men](#) under 30 say they have no close friends. Teenage boys [now spend two hours less a week socializing](#) than girls and they also spend about seven hours more per week than their female peers on screens.

As a mother of boys, I get a chill down my spine at these numbers. And my own research has fed my fears. I talked to boys of all types. Jocks and incels, popular kids and socially awkward, rich and poor. And the same theme came up over and over for boys who on the face of it had little else in common. They were lonely.

Some of them were genuinely isolated. Others had plenty of friends. But almost all of them had the nagging sense that something important was missing in those friendships. They found it almost impossible to talk to their male peers about anything intimate or express vulnerability. One teenager described his social circle, a group of boys who had been best friends since kindergarten, as a "very unsupportive support system." Another revealed that he could recall only one emotionally open conversation with a male friend in his life, and that even his twin brother had not seen him cry in years. But they felt unable to articulate this pain or seek help, because of a fear that, because they were boys, no one would listen.

As one 20-year-old put it, “If a man voices any concern, they get deflected with all of their so-called privileges.” He added: “They’d be like, ‘Whatever. Women have suffered more than you, so you have no right to complain.’”

Almost without exception, the boys I talked to craved closer, more emotionally open relationships, but had neither the skills nor the social permission to change the story.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that boys don’t know how to listen and engage with their friends’ emotions on any deeper level; after all, no one really engages with theirs. We are convinced that men and boys have had more than their fair share of our attention already because in a sexist society, male opinions hold outsized value. But the world — including their own parents — has less time for their feelings.

One study from 2014 showed that parents [were more likely](#) to use emotional words when talking with their 4-year-old daughters than those speaking to their 4-year-old sons. (Right from birth, mothers [were less likely to chat back](#) to boys’ early sounds.) A [more recent study](#) comparing fathers of boys with fathers of girls found that fathers of boys were less attentively engaged with their boys, spent less time talking about their son’s sad feelings and instead were more likely to roughhouse with them. They even used subtly different vocabularies when talking with boys, with fewer feelings-centered words, and more competition and winning-focused language.

Spend any time in the manosphere, and it’s easy to start to hate men and boys. The extreme misogyny, the gleeful hate speech, the violent threats and thrum of menace make it hard to summon much sympathy for male concerns, and easy to forget the ways that patriarchy harms them, too.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that in the grip of the culture wars, caring about boys has become subtly coded as a right-wing cause, a dog whistle for a kind of bad-faith politicking. Men have had way more than their fair share of our concern already, the reasoning goes, and now it’s time for them to pipe down. But for boys, privilege and harm intertwine in complex ways — male socialization is a strangely destructive blend of indulgence and neglect. Under patriarchy, boys and men get everything, except the thing that’s most worth having: human connection.

Silencing or demonizing boys in the name of progressive ideals is only reinforcing this problem, pushing them further into isolation and defensiveness. The prescription for creating a generation of healthier, more socially and emotionally competent men is the same in the wider political discourse as it is in our own homes — to approach boys generously rather than punitively. We need to acknowledge boys’ feelings, to talk with our sons in the same way we do our daughters, to hear them and empathize rather than dismiss or minimize, and engage with them as fully emotional beings.

They are more than ready to talk. We just need to make sure we are listening.